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1.

An Understanding of International Politics as Identity Conflicts

Why did France grant Indochina independence 1954 but deny the same status to the North African territories? Why did it take eight more years and thousands of dead civilians and soldiers before Algeria got its independence?

Indochina and Algeria are two processes of decolonisation, in many ways more similar than different, yet in the first case France entered negotiations, which led to independence, and in the second, there was not any place for negotiations. In both cases there was a pressure for national independence. Why did France act so differently in one case of territorial secession than in the other?¹

The most common explanation among historians would highlight the existence of a national sentiment that made independence acceptable in the case of Indochina, but not in that of North Africa. National sentiments are not founded in a vacuum, however; they are, in the foreign policy context, also an outcome of policy processes, which include ideas regarding national identity and discussions among foreign policy elites. These discussions and this policy formation are grounded in national myths and national opinion. The existence of conflicting identity conceptions and conflicting individuals in decolonising France are here investigated and

1 Another perspective is to deny the similarities between the two cases. Indochina could then be seen as a military failure after years of war, when Algeria was just in the beginning of a war to come. France gives therefore up Indochina but tries to take revenge through Algeria. But this perspective denies that North Africa – and Algeria specific – had been the scene of several uprisings since 1945 (exactly as Indochina). And it also denies that the war in Indochina had been a low intense conflict (and with French professional troops only) during a couple of years, with irregular outbreaks. In my view these two conflicts have more in common than they differ. See also the empirical chapter six and seven in this book.

applied as examples for developing an analysis of foreign policy outcome focused not on information processing or beliefs, but rather a model of discursive structures and therefore a serious challenger to the traditional rational actor-model, as well as to mainstream constructivist approaches.²

In the decolonisation literature there are both rationalistic approaches and constructivist approaches. Among the most common explanations of decolonisation are changes in global power structures, efforts of independence movements and imperial overstretch. These three approaches share the assumption that state behaviour is best explained with reference to certain objective interests. These interests give rise to cost-benefit analyses, which in turn determines state behaviour – to withdraw, or not.

For historian H.L. Wesseling decolonisation was inevitable. Despite this he tries to define why it did happen when it did and how. He argues that the Second World War has weakened Europe so much that it had to be restored after the war, a goal that could not be reached with the colonies, only without them. He also argues that the process of decolonisation was determined by if the colony being occupied or not by the enemy.³ But this argument does not answer the question why two more or less occupied territories (Algeria and Indochina) did get independence at different occasions. Historian Tony Chafer highlights the push-pull-mechanism between Paris and the federal French union government in West Africa to explain why the West African colonies choose independence and not further association. His conclusion is that personalities and political power struggle were more important than principles.⁴

A political scientist, Miles Kahler, has supposed that the internally divided France at the time of decolonisation gave way for a foreign policy that also maintained these divisions. Ideology was an interpreting tool for the colonial uprisings and the party splits inside parliament became deeper through the decolonisation process.⁵ But even if Kahler makes sense of why Britain gave India independence in 1947 and France went to war in Algeria, it is not understood how and why Algeria and Indochina differed so much.

While important, these rationalist explanations suffer from a series of shortcomings. Most of the nations in our world should today refuse to use slavery even though it was presented as effective, profitable and well organised. There are several values and norms that restrict state behaviour

2 As examples Allison 1971, George 1980, Adler 1997.

3 Wesseling 1997.

4 Chafer 2002.

5 Kahler 1984.

and these have been given a more systematic account in the constructivist approaches. Constructivist approaches of decolonisation focus on international politics as fundamentally a matter of norms, identity and shared knowledge. The most prominent constructivist approaches are loss of imperial will, internally restructuring inside the colonial powers and new norms or new discourses in the international society. These approaches share the assumption that state behaviour is best explained with reference to common social behaviour and ideas.

In my opinion also constructivist approaches has shortcomings, namely that none of them systematically integrate mechanisms for explaining how and when decolonisation take place. In the long run France became a European power from 1954 until 1962, surely also because of changing norms. But why was then not all territories granted independence at the same time and already around 1950? None of the constructivist approaches has fully explained how and when a decolonisation process takes place.

Political scientist Robert H Jackson argues that the normative anti-colonialist framework grew out of the Second World War.⁶ But he does not explain why India was granted independence in 1947 but Algeria in 1962. Economic historians and geographers Robert Aldrich and John Connell – although not constructivists – argues that the nationalist sentiments in the third world and the decline of ideological differences in world politics was the causal processes for de-colonisation.⁷ But these explanations could neither answer the question why independence takes place at a given time and through a given process.

Other explanations of French decolonisation have highlighted that North Africa, in the Sahara desert, hide great oil resources. But they were not yet discovered and exploited in the beginnings of the 1950s. Sahara also became the place where France tested atomic bombs in 1960, but this military weapon was not either yet materialized. The most common explanation is the particularistic explanation that puts its force on the French demand for grandeur. France needed its territories over-seas to maintain its global power. But why did then Indochina – with its extremely strategic position – got independence but not Algeria, which did not has a global position? The answer is commonly said to be “the military was defeated in Indochina”. Surely they were defeated, but it was the French democratic government – not a military regime – that after international negotiations gave Indochina independence. Why then did the struggle in Algeria get on for years, long after that the military in war terms was defeated also there?

6 Jackson 1993.

7 Aldrich and Connell 1998.

My answer is that the most plausible explanation is about the conception of French national identity. Indochina was never as important in the powerful elite conceptions of French identity as Algeria was.⁸

My argument is though that in a France, preoccupied with defining herself (in an identity crisis), it was impossible to establish a new national identity and have it broadly accepted. Given his success in Indochina, Prime Minister Pierre Mendès France believed that his new ideas had indeed been accepted. In reality, however, his solution for Indochina only happened to be compatible with the power relations and discourse of a conventional national identity. In the case of Algeria, it became evident that his conception of national identity was in principle fundamentally incompatible with the powerful French national identity conception of the military and the conservative groups among the landowners and businessmen at this time. Being in charge of the economic and symbolic state power, and because of a weak parliamentary system, these groups could enforce their national identity conception on the solutions for Algeria.

Theoretically, the above response highlights power relations as decisive factors in identity explanations. As one of few in constructivist international politics, political scientist Janice Bially Mattern has pointed out how and why power structures are important even though a constructivist approach is used. She connects representational force, physical force and social construction thereby questioning the more or less naïve reflection between shared norms on one hand and equality in deliberation on these norms on the other.⁹ Constructivism seldom treats power asymmetry systematically and therefore power and power structures often are left out of the identity explanations.

My contribution to the decolonisation literature is a systematic analysis of power and how power affects social constructions of national identity. This analysis is mainly built on a discursive reading and interpretation of how French decolonisation did proceed during the short period of the Pierre Mendès France government in 1954 and his period as minister in the Mollet government 1956. During this period Indochina was granted independence and the Algerian war begun.

8 In a recent study Todd Shepard argues that the Algerian war made an end to the conception of a cosmopolitan French identity. Shepard argues that France absolved itself from the consequences of decolonization by giving up their ideas of republican principles. Shepard 2006. This argument though was already formulated several years ago in Azar 2001 who shows, very convincing, that the Algerian war shook the French identity in its foundations. None of these mentioned studies are interested in the questions of how and why, questions which is in the middle of this study.

9 Mattern 2000, 2001, 2005, Jackson ed. 2004.

National identity as a scientific concept consists in my view of *foundations*, *discourse* and *rhetoric*, and an idea must be accepted by the discourse in order to enjoy acceptance in foreign policy decisions. An idea that is compatible at the argument level can indeed slowly alter the concept of national identity, bringing to light the limits of the discourse and showing that power relations are obsolete.¹⁰ Altered foundation could also reshape the discourse and therefore also the arguments. Only in these two ways a new national identity conception – as a discursive order – could be collectively accepted.

In the following chapter I discuss my research design and analytical perspective in detail. In Chapter Three and Four, I investigate and analyse identity conceptions in the French public as well as in the foreign policy elite. I then focus on the identity conception of Pierre Mendès France (Chapter Five), mainly through an analysis of his collected writings. The purpose here is to demonstrate when and where Mendès France's conceptions ceased to correspond to the national conception, and thus begin to outline the limits of his impact. In Chapters Six and Seven, I discuss the two cases at hand, Indochina and Algeria, and conclude the study in Chapter Eight with broader theoretical stipulations.

10 This discussion about results will be both evaluated and developed in the last chapter. In this section it has the function of pointing at a tentative conclusion.